

from CONTROL THEORY
IN THE CLASSROOM
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A New Approach Is Needed If More Students Are to Work in School

Teaching is a hard job when students make an effort to learn. When they make no effort, it is an impossible one. This simple fact, well known to all teachers, is the reason so many students are learning so little in school. Despite their hard work, teachers are confronted daily with increasing numbers of students who make little or no effort to learn. This problem is not new. Criticism of the schools for low student achievement and recommendations to improve it have been offered more or less continuously since the end of World War II. For example, in a 1984 report to the President carrying the dramatic title, *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that our schools need to lengthen both the school day and year, make courses harder and give more homework.

While no one knows better than teachers that our schools are not functioning well, to say that the nation is at risk is untrue. At present, we have no shortage of educated people in any field, except, paradoxically, in the poorly compensated field of teaching. There are no good colleges short of well-qualified students (UCLA turned away 4,000 qualified freshmen in the fall of '85), and while there seems to be some truth to the contention that many of these hardworking high school graduates seem less than proficient in English, math and science, this deficiency is hardly a peril to our nation.

If reports like *A Nation at Risk* were the only criticism of the schools, they would be easy to dismiss. The language

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may be new but they offer nothing that has not been said many times before with little good effect. What cannot and should not be dismissed is that today many people, even teachers who in the past would not have thought of doing so, are taking their children out of public schools and sending them to private schools at great financial hardship. They are doing this not only because they have lost confidence in the schools, but because they have little confidence that the simplistic work-them-harder-and-longer critiques like *A Nation at Risk* will do anything to make their local schools better places for their children.

X { While the number of families who are doing this is still relatively small, it is a growing cancer gnawing at our vital system of public education. The public schools are not only losing students, they are losing the family-motivated students whom they can least afford to lose. If public education is weakened in this way, we will all lose, but the greatest losers will be the dedicated teachers who are the backbone of the system. It is to these hardworking teachers who are looking for a way to get more students to work hard in school that this book is addressed.

What is true about our schools, and has been true since the end of World War II when we first began to make a real effort to pursue universal education through to high school graduation, is that many students (my very conservative estimate is at least 50 percent by the eighth grade) who are intelligent enough to do well, many even brilliantly, do poorly. Many of these do not even finish the tenth grade: Most do not learn enough to become proficient in the basic skills at a sixth grade level, a significant group do not even learn to read and *all* hate school.

But the educational reforms suggested by the National Commission on Excellence in Education do not address this group. Their recommendations for longer hours, more homework and more emphasis on science, math and writing may help some of the half who are now making an effort to learn. But even in that group many will give up if the work gets harder, and all in the half who are doing

little now will do less and hate school more. The burden of teachers, already overwhelmed by students who make little or no effort to learn, will become unbearable. The gap between the school haves and have-nots, already a major source of disruption, will grow wider.

There is still employment in this country for the 50 percent who do not learn in school. In fact, low-pay service jobs are proliferating at a much higher rate than high-pay jobs that require an education. Unfortunately, most school failures, especially those in the white majority culture, have little interest in this kind of work. Unable to do what they would like because they lack education and unsatisfied with what they can do with the little education they have, too many of these young people turn to drugs, delinquency and procreation in an effort to satisfy whatever it is they want. Many, however, when they "escape" from their unhappy school experience, do put their brains to work on the menial jobs they can get. Finding that hard work does lead to some success, they buckle down and learn (either in or out of school) what it takes to become even more successful.

When no more than half of our secondary school students are willing to make an effort to learn, and therefore cannot be taught, what we have is not so much a risk to the nation as an enormous waste of human and financial resources. It is no wonder that teachers grow discouraged and taxpayers who look at test results grow restless, and, wanting to assess blame, accuse teachers of not being able to do the impossible. The critics refuse to face the fact that when we talk about our secondary schools, we are really talking about two very different systems within each school. In the first, both teachers and students are functioning well and filling our good colleges with qualified applicants. In the second, the students, many of whom drop out well before the twelfth grade, are nonfunctioning, and the teachers, despite hard work and the best intentions, are able to do little more than serve as custodians.

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We also should realize that this second school system is very expensive. Unlike the first, in which one teacher can function reasonably well with a class of twenty-five to thirty students, in the second system a teacher cannot function effectively with as many as twenty in her class and nine to ten is average. To reach them, most schools make a great effort and the result of this effort is an expensive proliferation of administrators, counselors, psychologists, special educators, reading specialists and whole alternative schools with classes that at times run with only five to six pupils. But this elaborate system does not even hold the line and its failures fill prison and welfare rolls, populate drug rehabilitation centers and are a major source of patients for both our general and mental hospitals. Think of how much more money would be available to our schools if we could increase the first system by even 25 percent. For a start, we could easily reduce class size to less than twenty students just with the money saved in schools. If schools could get even a small percentage of the other money saved, for example, that saved by reduced crime, school programs could be made immeasurably richer.

X Because their numbers are so large, many students in the second system, especially if they are quiet and test as potentially capable, get no special education even though school officials recognize that they won't work in regular classes. To deal with them, almost all schools have devised a variety of ways called tracking to separate them from those who will work. Regular teachers saddled with large classes of unmotivated students find that no matter how hard they try, they are lucky to be able to maintain a semblance of order. In classes with many more than half of these students, there is usually a tacit agreement: If the students will not disrupt the class, they will be passed on, and if they sit long enough, they may even "earn" some kind of a diploma. This policy is easy to criticize, but for many of the low-skill service jobs that these students are qualified to fill, the fact that they have learned to sit qui-

etly and not complain may be good preparation. Also, if they did not have a diploma, they might not be able to get any job, which would make them a far greater burden on us all.

X There are a great many highly motivated teachers who are attracted by the challenge of trying to teach unmotivated students. These teachers find satisfaction in using their ingenuity to try to reach those students, and many are successful as long as the students are in small remedial classes where there are more personal contacts and fewer restrictions on what they can do. Even so, this work is exhausting and, in most cases, unrewarding because students who make an effort in remedial classes often refuse to continue to make this effort when they are returned to the larger, less flexible traditional classes that they previously found so frustrating.

After years of this hard, frustrating work, some of these skillful teachers are promoted out of the classroom into the huge proliferation of better paying and more prestigious nonclassroom positions such as consulting, administration, counseling and coaching. Most would still prefer to teach if they could be assured that they would have more motivated students and also could earn as much as they get for nonclassroom work. Significant numbers of good secondary teachers, unable to get out of the classroom and discouraged because so many students won't work, go into industry where the work is easier and the pay better. Most teachers, however, find themselves

X in the middle, teaching just enough motivated students to get some satisfaction, but not enough to make their job rewarding. If you are in this group, the changes suggested in this book should make your job much more satisfying than it is now.

To deal with students who are not working in school, we could continue to talk endlessly about upgrading the curriculum—it is easy to talk tough. We've been doing it since *Sputnik*, but with no noticeable effect. We are all aware that this talk has not significantly reduced the num-

ber of students who do not choose to apply themselves in school. It is my contention that unless we stop talking in generalities and begin to talk about some specific changes in the structure of our teaching and in the role of the teacher in that new structure, and give these changes a fair trial, we will not make a dent in the growing number of unmotivated students who are essentially forced to attend school. Many come voluntarily for lack of something better to do, but most of these drop out well before graduation.

Based upon the fact that we seem unable to get more than half the students involved in working hard in almost all public schools, I believe that we have gone as far as we can go with the traditional structure of our secondary schools. This structure, with which we are all familiar, is a teacher in the front of the room facing thirty to forty students sitting in rows. Traditionally, the teacher is the educational leader and all that goes on in that class depends on him or her. Each student learns as an individual, depending only upon himself and what he can get from a busy teacher. Not only do students not depend upon each other for learning, but in most classes, since they are in competition with each other for grades, there is little motivation to help each other: The less their classmates learn, the better it is for them.

The schools are like a piston-driven aircraft engine: good for what it can do, but obsolete if we want much more power. Since it was first invented, it has been greatly improved as, indeed, we have improved our schools. But forty years ago we recognized that we had reached the limits of this engine and that to attempt to improve it further was economically unsound. Because we wanted more power, we turned to a new structure, the jet engine. All the suggestions that are now being made to improve the schools, whether by presidential panels or anyone else, are attempts to get more out of a structure that, like the piston engine, has reached its limits. Here and there we see a little improvement, but no one has been able to

put any idea into practice that, using the present structure, will attract more than half the students, even from affluent communities where we assume students are more motivated, to work hard in a public secondary school.

What this book will recommend is a major change in the structure of how we teach and in the role of the teacher so that he or she can teach effectively in this new structure. These changes, best called *learning-teams*, should be able to increase significantly the number of students who are willing to work harder in school. But it will serve no purpose to make such a sweeping recommendation unless I can offer a sensible explanation of why we should make this change. To do this, I would like to explain a new theory of human behavior called *control theory*¹ that will provide a powerful rationale, not only for why so many students are not working now, but for making the changes that I believe need to be made in the classroom structure which will lead to them starting to work.

If control theory can lead us to understand both the current impasse in our schools and ways to correct it, it is important that we recognize that this theory is almost the exact opposite of the traditional stimulus-response (s-r) theory that has led us to where we are now. In order to appreciate how different this theory is from what most of us believe, I will attempt to explain it thoroughly enough so that any teacher who wishes can begin to use it in his or her life away from school. For example, recently while lecturing at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, I was eating lunch with a psychology professor who told me that when she heard me explain control theory four years earlier, she was able to use this theory to stop the migraine headaches from which she had suffered for many years. She has not had one headache since then and does not expect ever to have one again. This is one of the more dramatic examples of the power of this theory that I have encountered, but I have not met anyone who has learned to use it who has not told me how useful it is. This

is why I urge the teachers who read this book to begin to use it in their lives: Once you do, you will have no hesitation in expanding its use to your classroom. As you grow more familiar with it, you will not only use it in the ways that I will suggest, but even more important, you will be able to figure out many effective ways on your own. Simply stated, the best way to begin to use control theory is to start to live it.

I am fully aware that no expert will ever change what goes on in your classroom by *telling* you what to do. Depending on outside experts is another failing of s-r theory, which has as its basic premise the wrong idea that what we do is motivated by people or events outside of us. I am sure you would agree with the control theory contention that all an expert can do is point to a new way. If you decide to follow, it is because you believe that this new way is not only good for your students, but for you as well. In fact, as I will soon explain, it is an axiom of control theory that no one does anything, simple or complex, because someone tells them to do it. All living creatures, and we are no exception, only do what they believe is most satisfying to them, and the main reason our schools are less effective than we would like them to be is that, where students are concerned, we have failed to appreciate this fact.

Unless you have had your head in the sand, you cannot fail to agree that about half of the secondary students in your regular classes make no consistent effort to learn. In fact, if you take an honest look at the young people in your own greater family, you will see that close to half of them are firmly entrenched in this no-effort group. It is also obvious that as much as you know that this serious situation exists, you seem powerless to change this frustrating situation either in your classes or, in most cases, with your own children.

When you, as a teacher, turn to experts for help, it is as though they have looked over the situation and failed to see that your main problem is with those who are not

now making an effort—the have-nots where education is concerned. Perhaps, for those who are working, the haves, harder courses and more intensive instruction that the “experts” are pushing will “make” them do more, but to offer a harder task to the have-nots and expect more work is ridiculous. If we want to get students to do the work necessary to learn, we must create schools in which students and teachers (not parents or experts) perceive that there is a payoff for them if they work harder.

Historically, schools were created because they were the most efficient way to prepare young people to do the work of an increasingly complex society. Parents wanted their children to get ahead and were willing to pay for schools that helped them to do so. But it is only since World War II that we (not students or teachers) made the decision that all children should be educated through high school whether they had any desire for this education or not. Prior to that time, while we may have offered everyone a high school education, we did not weep for those who decided that less was good enough for them. Dropping out, which was greater then than now, was not considered by us or them the personal failure that it is today.

There is no doubt in my mind, however, that the goal to get all students through high school, while sensible then, is even more so now. We all are well aware that our society is getting increasingly education dependent: Even for menial jobs most employers require a high school diploma as proof of dedication, if not knowledge. Besides, even menial jobs are getting increasingly technical: An auto mechanic who does not know how to use electronic equipment cannot repair today's cars. But regardless of practical need, in the society of the late twentieth century, if you have no education, you are nobody: You have no legitimate power and are unlikely to get any until you get some education.

And as I will explain in detail in a later chapter, today, more than ever in our history, everyone wants to be somebody, so there are a lot of angry, frustrated young people

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around (or in jail) who are well aware that they would be a lot better off if they had an education. But the Catch-22 is that when they were in school they didn't find the daily work satisfying enough to make the effort to do it. Almost all of the nonworking students whom you face daily in your classes are well aware that a diploma has value. If you don't believe me, ask them. Even though they know this, they do not work because the payoff is too far away. Later, they may bitterly resent their lack of education, but by then, for many of them, it is too late.

Control theory is all about payoff, about what we need as human beings to be satisfied. Since students spend so much time in school, they must find a way to satisfy their needs both in and out of class. Those who work hard in secondary school and succeed have found a way to get some immediate satisfaction of these needs through the work they do in class. Those who do not succeed gradually stop working. They have made the disastrous (for them) decision that the work they do does not provide them with enough current need satisfaction to make it worthwhile to continue to try.

The problem of not working in school is less acute in elementary school because young students are mostly concerned with satisfying their needs for care and belonging, and these needs are easier to satisfy in the self-contained classes that most elementary schools use than in the changing classes of a junior high or middle school. Therefore, most young students try to learn, especially in the early grades, because they love their parents and want to please them. If they spend the school day with a caring teacher, they get love both at home and at school. But as they move into junior high and teachers necessarily become less personal and less available, students quickly lose most of the school caring that was more available in elementary school. They turn more and more to satisfying their belonging needs with their friends, and as they grow older, depend less upon teachers and even parents for companionship.

If their friends work hard in school, then they, as the haves, will be motivated to work hard to keep these friends. But if they are friends with the have-nots and those friends are as dissatisfied with school as they are, their friendship is strengthened by the fact that they all hate school. To get the have-nots to work in secondary school, we have to devise programs in which it makes sense for the two groups both to become friendly with each other and to work together. This will be hard in the beginning because the groups are educationally and socially very far apart. But if the learning-team approach that will be explained later continues into higher grades, there will eventually be less separation between the groups. This, in turn, will lead all students to do more work and become better friends.

Most students who are not working will admit that they would be better off if they did more work. Perhaps it is the diploma they value more than an education, but they are not unaware that education has value too. They can be compared to an overweight person who, more than anyone, knows the value of losing weight, but continues to eat because there is just not enough immediate payoff in dieting. Students don't work because there is not enough immediate payoff either in or out of school. And like the obese person who has not dieted for years and adds a little weight each year, the further a student slips behind, the harder it is to summon up the strength to begin to work. But even this student, given sufficient immediate payoff and a chance to make up the work, will usually start working because he almost never loses the idea that education, or at least a diploma, has value.

The lesson that we have to learn, and by their recommendations, the panel that called our educational system a risk to the nation has not learned this lesson, is that we cannot pressure any student to work if he does not believe the work is satisfying. We can force many students to stay in school, which we do to some extent by closing off full-time job opportunities, but we can no more make those

students work than we can make the proverbial horse drink even though we tether him to the water trough. We are far too concerned with discipline, with how to "make" students follow rules, and not enough concerned with providing the satisfying education that would make our over-concern with discipline unnecessary.

A disruptive student is no different from that same proverbial horse who would likely kick up his heels if he is held too long at the water when he isn't thirsty. Discipline is only a problem when students are forced into classes where they do not experience satisfaction. There are no discipline problems in any class where the students believe that if they make an effort to learn, they will gain some immediate satisfaction. To focus on discipline is to ignore the real problem: We will never be able to get students (or anyone else) to be in good order if, day after day, we try to force them to do what they do not find satisfying. If we insist on maintaining our traditional classroom structure, we will not be able to create classes that are significantly more satisfying than what we have now.

For far too long we have believed the stimulus-response assumption that living creatures, whether they are human or any other species, can be motivated to work or to be in good order by what we can do *to* them or *for* them. In schools the application of this incorrect theory has been made even worse by the fact that we tend to do far more *to* students who will not work than *for* them. For example, we tend to punish far more than to reward, especially in secondary schools. While control theory points out that it is ineffective to do either, reward is less destructive than punishment, so following s-r theory, most schools unfortunately use its most destructive component.

We have been led by s-r theory to believe that failing or disruptive students want to avoid pain so badly that if we threaten or hurt them enough, we can force them to do what *we* want. Since suffering is never need fulfilling, punishment often seems to motivate for brief periods; but I think the evidence is quite clear that punishment is not

a good long-term motivator for anyone and it is long-term, not short-term, motivation that is needed in schools. Most of the students in your classes who are not working have suffered through so many threats and punishments (and often been bribed at home with promises of money or cars) that they have become immune. Very few will make any long-term change no matter what we do that is *to* or *for* them.

When the task is completely menial and the punishments severe, these external motivators do seem to work for quite a while. In concentration camps, for example, many of the victims did what they were told for years because they wanted to stay alive, but they were only assigned menial tasks—nothing that required any intelligence. Their captors knew that even prisoners struggling to survive can only be coerced to do, never trusted to think. Where education (no menial task by anyone's standard) is concerned, there is no punishment that can make any students learn if they don't want to. If the punishment or reward is extreme, they may try a little harder or a little longer, but in the end, they will mostly learn to hate or ridicule an education that they do not believe is satisfying to them.

* Most parents and even a few teachers assume that regardless of a student's motivation, a good teacher can educate almost all students. But they also operate under the assumption that almost all students want to learn what is taught in school. While there is no doubt that some teachers are more skillful at motivating than others, there is no teacher, no matter how skilled, who can teach a student who does not want to learn. And whether we want to admit it or not, there are plenty of students who attend your school regularly who have little or no desire to learn what is being taught.

It is no one's fault that we are burdened with these traditional, false assumptions that follow s-r theory. Until the last fifteen years, when control theory was adapted to human behavior, they have never been seriously chal-

lenged. Unlike machines, which are always controlled by whoever operates them (and for which s-r theory is valid), no living creature can be stimulated into "proper" performance. In fact, all living creatures, from simple to complex, control themselves. We do not do as we are told unless doing so satisfies us more than anything else we believe we can do at the time.

Control theory explains that all of our behavior is always our best attempt at the time to satisfy at least five powerful forces which, because they are built into our genetic structure, are best called basic needs. These needs, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3, range from the mostly physiological need to stay alive and reproduce to the four psychological needs: belonging (which includes love), power, freedom and fun. While less tangible than our physical structure, they are as much a part of our genetic heritage as our arms and legs. We can no more deny the constant urge to satisfy them than we can deny the color of our eyes or the shape of our nose.

All of our behavior, whether it is as simple as swallowing our food to stay alive or as complicated as struggling to gain love when we are lonely, is always our best attempt to satisfy one or more of these basic needs. Machines have no internal needs. Whatever they do, they do only when directed by a person or, in some cases, by another machine. Without external direction, machines do not function. We, on the other hand, because we are always attempting to satisfy one or more of our basic needs, are always behaving. We are well aware that students who don't work in school don't stop behaving. Driven by their needs, they behave a great deal, but since what they tend to do is not what we want, we call this unwanted behavior a discipline problem.

Actually, students function no differently in school than anywhere else; they attempt to fulfill whatever need they detect is most unsatisfied at the time. If they are hungry, they will try to find food, or at least think about food much more than about what is being taught. If they

are lonely, they will spend their time looking for friends rather than knowledge. If there is no fun, they will attempt to play. If there is total regimentation, they will look for a chance for freedom. If they flunk and feel powerless, they will refuse to cooperate or use drugs (mostly alcohol) to try to gain the feeling that they have some power. If no one respects them, drugs give them the feelings of power and respect that they desperately want. Logically, it is hard to fault a powerless student for using drugs when even powerful athletes and actors turn to them in moments of boredom when they are not in the spotlight.

If, as control theory teaches, nothing outside of us, including school, can ever fulfill our needs for us because we can only do this for ourselves, *a good school could be defined as a place where almost all students believe that if they do some work, they will be able to satisfy their needs enough so that it makes sense to keep working.* While they will gain some immediate satisfaction, students will also be able to see that even work which is not immediately satisfying will lead to a payoff, like a diploma, in the future. Defined this way, very few secondary schools are good schools because these schools, following traditional s-r reasoning, do not have either student or teacher satisfaction as a major goal. It is this flaw that the recommendations of this book will address directly. Based on the false assumption that all students want to learn what is taught, the goal of most schools is to concentrate on both teaching and directing students without taking into sufficient account whether what is done is satisfying to students or teachers. Since none of the nonworking students are satisfied by this mechanical, pump-in-the-knowledge approach, this goal is rarely achieved. In fact, even many of the motivated ones do not do as well as they could. Test scores are low and will stay low until almost all the students, and many more teachers, find school satisfying.

Many people reading this criticism will find it disturb-

ing. They will not agree that a major goal of a school is to be concerned with student and teacher satisfaction. They believe that students and teachers should appreciate all the work and money that goes into providing them with the education and the facilities that "we" know they need and should show that appreciation by working hard and complaining less. They believe this because when "they" were in school they don't remember that anyone worried about whether or not they were satisfied and still they worked hard. They also point to the facts that half the students *are* working now and a lot of teachers are satisfied as proof that there is nothing wrong with the way we run our schools, so there must be something seriously wrong with either teachers or students if so many are doing poorly.

Also, since those of you who read books like these were in the haves when you went to school, it is hard for you (or any of us) to understand why anyone would take a chance with his life by not working for an education. We keep thinking and hoping, as did the blue-ribbon government panel, that if they were just taught a little harder, these students would start working. But what schools did and still do that may work for half the students is not the point of my argument. The point is that right now at least half are not being reached by our present system, and if, by following the control theory that I will explain in this book, we can increase this number, it is worth trying. Besides, anything that we do to make school a better place for the unmotivated will make it even better for those who are willing to work, so there is much to gain and nothing to lose by taking a look at the changes that I will suggest.